



Reflections on the Face in Film

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Film Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 2. (Winter, 1977-1978), pp. 2-8.

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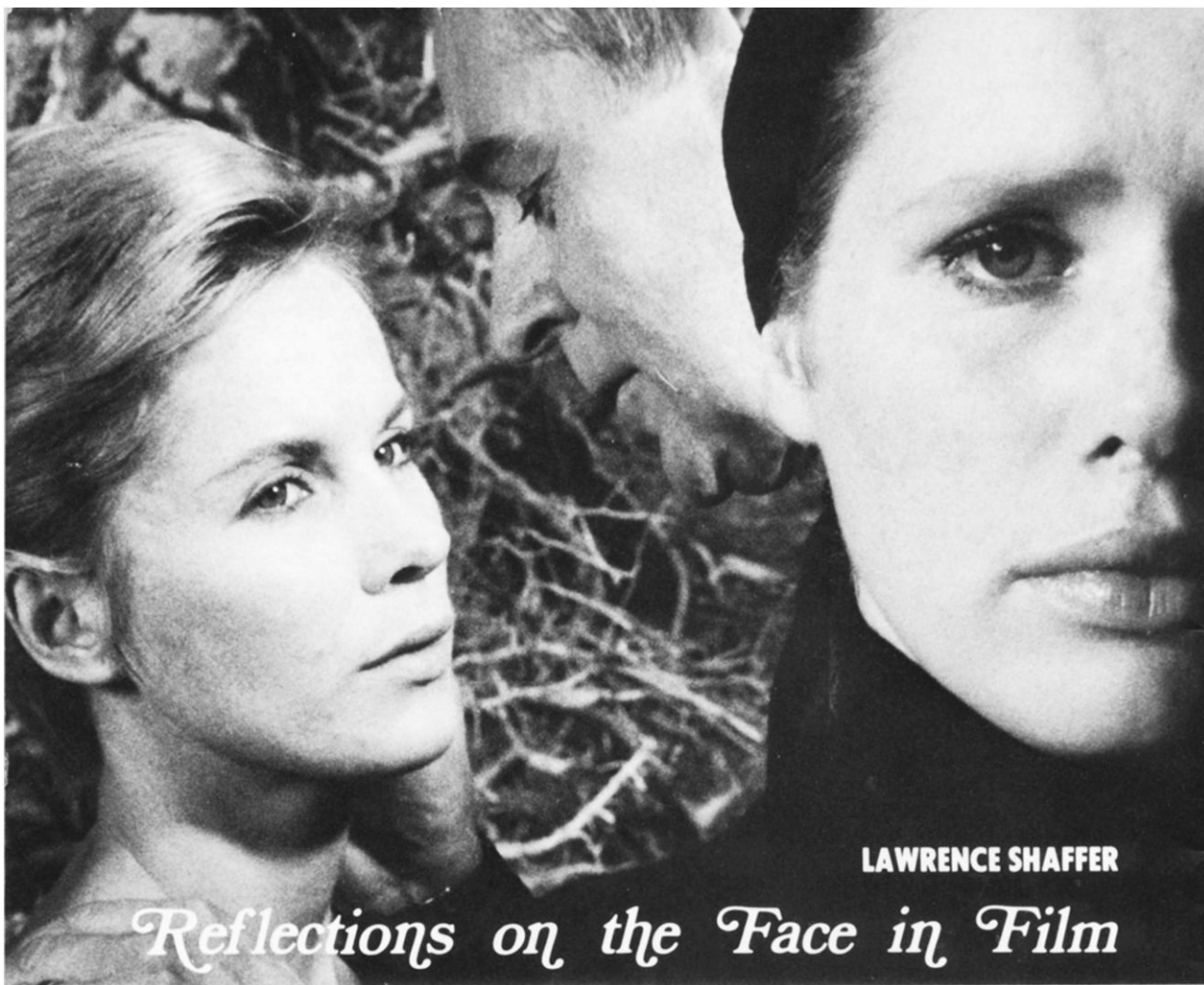
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LAWRENCE SHAFFER

Reflections on the Face in Film

A still of a still. But contrary to Keats's *Urn*, beauty perhaps but never truth is captured in the stilled crevices of motion. Tying up movement liberates time, time to consider. But whatever it means to *know* a face, a face arrested is not any the more "decipherable." In any event a face is not a code to be cracked, like a fortune cookie.

If *Blow-Up* followed the progress of Redgrave's face, frame by frame (seamless transition by seamless transition), then it would be Hemmings's face, suddenly inserted out of context as if into an amusement park cut-out, that would defy interpretation.

What a face fails to reveal at any snapshot moment is the serial record of its experiences. Except in a topographical sense. Otherwise, it is less a palimpsest than a mirror: so much has been registered only to be lost. A face lacks even the record of its erasures. It is scored by its history without retaining a score of that history. More and more intense scrutiny may reveal more surface details, but such details are not semantic markers to some "deep structure" of mind, character, and sensibility. That they may seem to be is a kind of *trompe l'oeil* triumph of sheer physiognomy, that the latter has "implications" beyond what meets

the eye. Physiognomy can suggest a whole mirage of character, sensibility, experience (think of Jean Gabin, Louis Calherne, Trevor Howard, Tracy and March). A face that looks "lived in" is a face that *seems* to comprise (or reprise) its past in any of its momentary expressions. Fredric March's sensibility did not somehow "in form" his features, osmotically, more than, say, Walter Pidgeon's. And yet that was the illusion. Physiognomy lent Karloff's face an iconic look, signifying a world beyond (or below) this one. Vincent Price, assaying the Karloff roles, can only be parodic because he must mug to try to reach the place from which Karloff effortlessly begins. Of course there was nothing *known*, nothing to be discovered behind Karloff's mad scientist brow. Surface, then, as a blind alley. The limits of perception. Nothing to choose between lunar close-ups and the man in the moon.

The childlike faith of science—that the more closely a thing is examined the more it will reveal—is matched in film by the close-up. Bergman makes a virtue of his vice in *Persona*, where close-ups of a voluntarily mute Liv Ullmann fail to reveal what makes her not tick, while close-ups of a totally expressive Bibi Anderson conversely demonstrate that if a face can express everything its owner feels, then whatever it is in human thought and feeling that is inexpressible has not been sufficiently nourished. In *Blow-Up*, Antonioni puns upon the pointillist limitation of photography, a limitation, that is, on what it can represent. If photography tries to penetrate appearances to reach some supposed truth behind them, the result is reductionism: representation is broken down into its abstract constituents. The skeptical epistemology of *Blow-Up* asserts that although the dots of progressively enlarged photos of faces are identical with those faces, *identity* (identification) actually recedes the "closer up" we get. Yet the face exerts an almost gravitational pull for filmmakers, for of all surfaces the face seems to promise most (because it is the most expressive) some revelatory truth behind it. But the camera does not necessarily get any closer to states of mind by getting closer to the face. And on the other side of the facial coin lies the notion of face-as-mask, concealing or misleading. But just as the face can reveal only so much, so can it mask only so much.

And as for subjective truth—what it's *like* "back there" or "behind"—the face in film, as in life, provides not the least inkling. The so-called subjective states it expresses can only be objective expressions for the viewer. Just as the suggested depth of the screen is illusory, so is that of the face. There is no interior we can penetrate to see what it's like from. No nether side.

Hemmings stares at Redgrave's photo, Redgrave stares back at Hemmings though in a different time frame. Such face-offs are the dilemma of the surface character of visual experience, the dilemma of a world, staring us in the face, that seems to signify so much behind it. But however we scrutinize it, we discover as little as the child who searches behind the screen for the "real" source of the images on the screen. What promises to be the transparency of the visible delivers as the inscrutability of the visible.

Nevertheless, the common complaint against film vis-à-vis the novel, that it is limited to the objectivity of visual surfaces, is only partly justified. It is true that what "knowledge" a piece of film can express is restricted to its surface and that although a surface can transcend itself by *representing* something other than itself, what this still means, in the case of film, is that film is limited to what the face can show. But since the face reflects thoughts and feelings, it is not just a surface but a reflecting surface, more communicative than the surface of a wall no matter how "expressive" the wall might be. And more significant also than a lake or mirror, which mindlessly reflect what they are forced to by circumstance, i.e.,



Left: *PERSONA*. Right: *BLOW-UP*.

other surfaces passing within their "view." So, faces in film are certainly more epistemologically valuable than the other surfaces on the screen—objects, landscapes, etc.—which can only, dumbly, be themselves. But this is not to claim that much. Nothing like a *key*. The face remains an impenetrable surface for all its "expressiveness."



At the end of *City Lights* the no longer blind heroine touches Chaplin's hand and "recognizes" him as the kind stranger who had befriended her when she was blind. It's a curious recognition scene, consisting not only of a connection but a disconnection, the asymmetry of the face now before her and the idealized image it has just displaced. Chaplin's facial response to the flower girl's (whose own face, now that it is able to look out in addition to being looked at, has taken its place in the reflective/reflexive interplay of normal social intercourse) is a screen-encompassing, transcendent smile that, over the years, has assumed mythic proportions. What does the smile

signify? Pride? Sheepishness? To know all is to accept all? What else can one do in the naked face of truth but smile? The problem of signification is insoluble if the smile is interpreted in isolation from the larger segments of character logic that inform it. The context is all. In this respect Chaplin's smile differs from the *Mona Lisa's* (and from Vanessa Redgrave's isolated "look") as indeed the serial character of film differs from the single-frame character of painting. But the problem of facial interpretation is more acute at this moment in *City Lights* than almost anywhere else in film, for not even contextual considerations, not even the viewer's eidetic retention of the entire gamut of Chaplin's facial phenomenology in the film prepares us for that smile. It is difficult to think of a comparable instance where a single expression has so transcended the character's previous range. What Chaplin achieves in that lingering moment as the screen slowly darkens so that we cannot be certain whether the smile is still there or whether its mystery is being sustained by its after-image is a supreme instance of what might be called perspectival non-identity. In that smile Chaplin is and yet isn't the same character we thought we knew, just as he is and isn't the benefactor the heroine thought she knew.

Look at anything intently enough (including the concept of "look") and, as Hemmings learned, it becomes more rather than less mysterious. What is it for Chaplin and the girl to "exchange looks"? The ambiguity of "looks" is that it can be applied to the face either as the object of others' looks or as the subject of one's own looking. Chaplin and the girl exchange looks not by *doing* anything, just by *looking*. When looks are exchanged, X walks away with Y's image and vice versa. But then there's also what X thinks Y's image of X is, which in turn affects X's self-image (and ditto for Y). So any exchange of looks also affects the way one looks at oneself. "Looks," then, gets at the whole subject-object figure/ground of human experience, the face being the border or boundary line of this reversible configuration. In any exchange of looks the face is Janus-faced. The difficulty, then, in "taking the measure" of Chaplin's smile is that it is not only reactive but reflexive. Chaplin's face reflects the once blind heroine's perception of it. Paradoxically, the smile is both outer-directed and

self-referring. This ambivalence is generally true of the face, but few moments in film have walked its tightrope so exquisitely. *Somehow*, Chaplin is smiling both at the girl and at himself. And *that* is the facing-mirrors conundrum that doesn't so much end *City Lights* as transfigure it.

Whatever *The Blue Angel* is "really about" what it *shows* are the different faces of Professor Unrat: smug professorial face vs. degraded vamped face, professorial face vs. clown face, face in the "first person" vs. mirrored face. In its progressive unmasking, the film explores face as mask and mask as face. Masks both conceal and, by their selection, reveal. Unrat's professorial face/mask is replaced by a silly flirtatious one, then by a desperately infatuated one, and ultimately by a clown face through which a damned spirit seems to stare. After each displacement we see both what had been concealed and what had been fabricated. But we cannot feel superior. Professor Unrat, c'est moi. For anyone, is there any such thing as his "natural" look?

The still eye of the hurricane: the scene where in clown's make-up Unrat fixes on his reflection in a tripartite mirror. The mirror inspection is that

uniquely reflexive moment in human experience when the face comes upon itself, compelled (let's face it) to adjust self-image to real image. It is the only time the face can get out of itself. In *M*, as a newspaper account of Lorre-as-madman is being narrated, we cut to Lorre inspecting himself in a mirror and seeing himself *as* a madman as he turns down the corners of his mouth, widens his eyes, etc. He is now seeing himself as others imagine him. He was and is mad but now he apperceives himself as "mad," just as Unrat has been degraded but now explicitly sees himself as "degraded." We see both men adjusting to a new recognition of themselves. When Lorre looks at a "Wanted" poster of himself, aghast that that child murderer is himself, we see him trying to catch up with this new image of himself: he contorts his face to conform to the new identification. If he could suddenly come upon himself at that moment he would have some difficulty recognizing himself!

That the face in film is never just a thing-in-itself but always a reflective metaphor has never been more obvious than in *The Blue Angel*. As Unrat assesses himself in the mirror, the reflection is a metaphor for the self-knowledge invading him as he gauges how far he's fallen. It is not his "real"

Left: Chaplin
in the last
scene of

CITY LIGHTS.

Right: Emil
Jannings in

THE BLUE ANGEL.



face he sees but a symbolic version of what he's become. We infer his "real" self peering through his eyes, as through a keyhole, at the awful spectacle (compare the eyes of Jean Marais, i.e., of the prince, seemingly penetrating his bestial face/mask in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*). The moment is horrible for *what* is seen but noble for *being* seen.

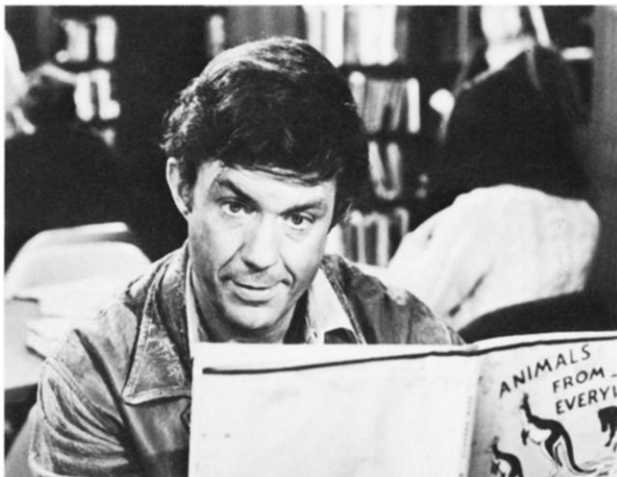
But films must earn such moments of awesome self-regard. When Jack Nicholson regards himself in a washroom mirror in the final scene of *Five Easy Pieces*, we can't imagine what he's seeing beyond literal duplication. The reflexivity has no metaphoric resonance because Nicholson has not been brought to any new understanding of himself. When he looks into the mirror we have no clue as to what he thinks he's seeing there. The Jannings-Nicholson distinction demonstrates the crucial role of *recognition* the face must play if a film is to become aware of what it's about. Only in the cathartic scene with his paralyzed father does Nicholson break through his mask in self-recognition. One thinks of Redgrave's breakdown in *The Browning Version*, wherein the face of a tyrannical Latin teacher imprisoned in Reichian character armor lets go of itself in convulsive sobbing in response to a student's thoughtfulness. This thaw in what had been a death-in-life mask constitutes the film's awareness of its "point," its self-recognition. A similar epiphany provides *La Strada* with its self-insight when Anthony Quinn collapses sobbing on a beach in recognition of his loneliness without Giulietta Masina. These breakdowns are the films' breakthroughs into self-recognition. Unrat will soon complete his entropic collapse in the famous cock-crowing scene. But before that black hole, that total loss of the integral self, there is the final, noble assessment in the mirror, the saving grace of *knowing*, the only one homo sapiens can count on.

We squirm when an actor puts on his character's face à la Marcel Marceau. We are transfixed when he simply appears to be "economizing" by using his own face in a kind of transmigratory transference. There is no objective method of calibrating such economy, only a subjective impression of double or single vision. In *Charly*, Cliff Robertson puts on what might very well be characteristic ex-

pressions of a retarded man, but the expressions still seem appliquéd. In contrast Jack Nicholson's face after he has been lobotomized at the end of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is transfigured—Nicholson's face has seemingly changed "inside out." The distinction is theoretically elusive but ostensibly clear. The theoretical problem hinges on the median position of the face between expression and inner feeling. Although the face is directed outward it reflects inward (reflects mental states). In these terms Robertson's face, as opposed to Nicholson's, was too much outer-directed and too little inner-reflective. The faces of certain actors—Brando, Gielgud, Clift, March, Tracy, Bogart—seem to be acutely inner-reflective. These actors seem to be doing a good deal of thinking. Their faces look preoccupied, as if attending to some inner voice, or memory.

The face, when not self-manipulated, shows what it does not know of itself. The actor who goes to see himself in a film and smiles in wonder at the naturalness of his smile is smiling at as good an actor as the subjects of *Candid Camera* or *cinéma vérité* (if they were actors!). The "organicness" of a facial expression means that the expression does not seem to have been programmed to signal what it is expressing. One criterion of "economic" actor-character identification is the apparent ease and fullness with which the actor's face occupies the fictional face it is impersonating. Curiously, the mechanism for this transference (across no space at all) is in the mind's eye. The actor successfully

Below: Cliff Robertson in CHARLY. Right: Ralph Richardson in THE HEIRESS.



sees himself as his character, thus defeating the perspectival non-identity of himself and his role.

Robertson's facial play in *Charly* exhibits the difference between how the face looks when the mind seems to be telling it what topology to adopt and how it looks when spontaneously reflecting mental states. In Robertson/*Charly*'s case we have a smart actor's mind telling the face to act as if it's reflecting a foolish mind. When the face is puppeteered, it "falls" in a different way from when, apparently unknown to the mind, it is spontaneously miming its mood. It may be that Robertson is simply asking us to accept his face as a symbolic icon for childishness. We are to ignore, as with the Japanese Bunraku puppet masters, Robertson behind his face, moving it. We are being asked, perhaps, simply to accept the equation of flitting, explicit, "spontaneous" expressions (expressions explicitly offered as *representing* childlike spontaneity) with childlike mentality. But then the problem with our being asked to suspend our belief in the naturalistic is that we bring to film not the stylistic expectations of the Japanese puppet play but the habitual expectations of real life. There, facial expression is seamless with mental states (except in cases of deception or repression, where nevertheless it may *appear* seamless). Failing to come together stereoscopically, Robertson/*Charly* remain, disastrously, composite.

Next to a still of Ralph Richardson from *The Heiress* imagine one of Ryan O'Neal from *Barry Lyndon*. The difference is the cinematic analogue of the difference between Thackeray and Henry James. Richardson has a cognizant look. You per-

ceive him as "looking out," a *subject* of perception, a Jamesian center of consciousness. O'Neal is merely an *object* of perception. *Barry Lyndon* has a hole at its center. Light comes through but the optic nerve is dead. A film's illumination may not be the exact sum of its characters' illuminations but it is difficult to think of a film that achieves the former without exhibiting the latter. It is somehow unsatisfying that we are brought to a recognition of the significance of *Rosebud* when no one else in the film but Kane is. But at least Kane, in making "Rosebud" his final word (at the *beginning* of the film) extends a thread through the cluttered labyrinth of the film that the *last* shot, of the burning sled, will make luminescent. The more *insightfulness* (taking place from within), the more cognizant looks in a film (*My Night With Maud*), the more luminous it tends to be. *Barry Lyndon* presents a scenically fulsome world which the characters, like statues in a park, seem unaware they're inhabiting. Instead of characters' sightlines creating their own views within the film, enlightening it from within, there is only a single omniscient perspective, dazzling but inconsequential, from without. Despite the deep focus of *Barry Lyndon*'s compositions, the absence of reflective facial imagery makes the film "flat as a picture." Everything is *seen*, but nothing is *known*. Just as faces aren't sheerly surfaces, they aren't sheerly "pictures." They are essentially reflectors, and, as such, have all the *suggested* (and suggestive) depth of mirrors despite their impenetrable flatness. And since, like Cocteau's mirrors, they are not automatic, one-to-one reflectors but "reflective" reflectors, endowing the external world of visual/tactile surface with subjective values of thought and feeling, of attitude, intention, and judgment, they have the potential of lending film the novelistic depth that, as sheer picture show, it otherwise lacks.

Unlike *Barry Lyndon*, *The Heiress* is animated by criss-crossing perspectives internally generated by the faces within the film, not (apparently) by the camera outside it. Each perspective ultimately arrives at an illuminating if chilling view of itself. The film's triumvirate point-of-view radiates out from the glacially knowing face and X-ray vision of Ralph Richardson, the homely but animated face of Olivia de Havilland, and the determinedly





"Cognizant looks":
Françoise
Fabian in
MY NIGHT AT
MAUD'S

charming face of Montgomery Clift. Again, it's what these faces seem to be seeing, what they seem to realize or seem not to realize and the transitional states between, that gives the film its conglomerate point-of-view. ("Seem" in that no matter how the camera tries to simulate subjectivity, we are still third-person interpreters of "the other.") Richardson sees Clift's face as a mask for whatever the facial expression of ruthless greed would look like. De Havilland doesn't even possess the notion of a face that instead of routinely expressing the mind "behind" it is manipulated by that mind to conceal its true feelings and intentions. Richardson's and de Havilland's viewpoints are clear. Clift's isn't. Of the three it is his face that earns Duncan's frightening "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face," frightening because in the distinction between inner and outer, on which the very concept of "expression" depends, lies the entire history of human deceit and pretense. Until the end it is impossible to determine the extent, if any, that Clift's face is a mask rather than a mirror. We search for some hint: a smile turning sour with the effort, a facial slip of any kind. Perhaps the mask has become the face, the actor has begun to believe his role, to take it at face value. (Such actor/character ambiguities are irresolvable because the actor's face is inseparable from the character's that it "embodies," an identity so close that "represents" is too weak a description of it.

There is no meta facial language to place the character's face within the perspective—i.e., make it the "object" of—the actor's.

The Heiress ends with de Havilland assuming her father's face—knowing at the expense of feeling. She sees that Clift has not been "sincere" (Clift has talked about being "sincere" the way Iago parades "honest"). Her face is now self-possessed because of the certain truth she has gained, not only about Clift but about herself. Dialogue certainly fills in *The Heiress*, but for all its staginess the film's major movements are not mapped out verbally but in the facial stances and facial evolution of the three protagonists.

What the face in film affords, as it does in life, is a vantage point. If the Invisible Man had truly lost his face instead of merely being faceless to others, the world would, conversely, be invisible to him, for visibility depends on a particular vantage point to be visible *from*. The filmgoer never wants to have sacrificed his view of a character's vantage point for the greater kinesthetic verisimilitude of what it subjectively is like to view things from a vantage point. That is, we are never happy with the substitution of camera for protagonist, because it is not *his seeing* that we are able to identify with but *him seeing*. This is what the "cognizant look" affords. Without it a film can have the same "look" a blind person has.